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### Graham-Brown: Palestinians and Their Society

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## Graham-Brown: Palestinians and Their Society

In addition to its historic parallels to the Mexican Revolution, Meiselas's work, however much it is the telling of the Nicaraguan experience, draws our attention to the contemporary struggles elsewhere in Central America, specifically in El Salvador and Guatemala.

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**Sarah Graham-Brown.** *Palestinians and Their Society*. Boston: Quartet Books, 1981. \$25.00.

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Quoting out of context is essential to the photographer's craft, says Szarkowski; a photograph's sense can be modified by the context in which it is published, says Barthes. Sarah Graham-Brown's photographic essay is an interesting example of a reconstructed context. Arab Palestinian inhabitants were often photographed since the late nineteenth century, posing for biblical allegories produced for the Christian foreign-and-pilgrim market. Graham-Brown analyzes some examples of such genre photographs to demonstrate the distortions of contemporary life they display. She suggests a new documentary reading of these and of other photographs to illustrate Arab social and economic realities in British Mandatory Palestine before 1948. Colonized societies were

all too often misrepresented in photography. They have been, and sometimes still are, both subjects and objects of a colonialist photographic discourse. The need for analysis is urgent. I therefore welcome Graham-Brown's effort and attempt, although her work is uneven.

The explication of life and society in Palestine through the careful reading of photographs from various sources is not a new endeavor. Professor Gustaf Dalman, head of the German Evangelical Institut, accompanied his monumental seven-volume work *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (*Work and Custom in Palestine*) by more than 500 photographs, quite a few of which are identical to those used by Graham-Brown. His work proves that biblical-scholarly reading of photographs—if scholarly it is—is not necessarily contradictory to the search for ethnographic authenticity. Some of his own photographs taken since 1900 and subsequently published in his books, of which the last volume appeared in 1942, would enrich Graham-Brown's essay.

In 1976, Shmuel Avitsur, Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Tel Aviv, published *Man and his Work: A Historical Atlas of Tools and Workshops in the Holy Land*. The atlas relies mostly on photographs, about 500 in number, many identical to those used by Dalman and by Graham-Brown, and on additional drawings. It also includes photographs of modernization and innovations introduced to Arab and Jewish society at the turn of the century.

There were early precursors not only in re-editing of photographs. Straightforward and unbiased documentary photographs were produced in the Holy Land since 1867. Bonfils himself, the French photographer in Beirut, Lebanon, whose typical studio output is criticized (with full justification) by Graham-Brown, produced such photographs of Palestinian Arabs and Jews since the 1870s. But the prominence of Bonfils's potpourri-portraits, consisting of "oriental" and "exotic" elements mixed with western-bourgeois photographic conventions, is due to publishers and buyers who preferred them to his more authentic photographs. The latter, more lifelike and less colorful, remained forgotten. The publishers often "adapted" many of Bonfils's already seasoned captions to improve sales or charitable donations. Graham-Brown sometimes reads captions more than images, and she does not sufficiently account for the difference—does not make the distinction between the photographers' original straightforward captions and the publishers' modifying ones. Sometimes she ignores the former even when they are visible in her reproductions, considering instead the latter ones that fit her thesis.



Since the turn of the century, photographers signing as "American Colony" in Jerusalem, of whom Graham-Brown mentions only Matson, produced an impressive body of straightforward documentation on Arab village life in the country. *National Geographic Magazine* published many of them in two outstanding selections in 1914 and 1915, along with some of the "biblical" genre portraits. The photographs speak forcefully for Lars Larsson, the uncredited photographer and Matson's tutor, and for his insight into contemporary Arab society. Graham-Brown publishes many of Larsson's and Matson's photographs, as did Dalman and Avitsur. Regrettably, she doesn't use most of the relevant documentary photographs produced between 1867 and 1918. Many of them would support her thesis by offering contrasting photographic approaches.

Graham-Brown claims that in photographs "power relationships . . . are only obvious when physical coercion is being used. . . . Otherwise, visual evidence of power and authority is largely symbolic. . . ." In fact, invisibility is in the very nature of power relationships and the dominant ideologies that are part of them. To render them visible is at the heart of documentary photography. The photographs in Graham-Brown's study showing Palestinian women in their daily work in fact and by implication constitute an eloquent representation of their status in the work force and society. The power relationship and exploitation to which they were submitted is obvious.

But Graham-Brown's explanatory captions which represent her readings of the photographs are worded so as to avoid the impression of social conflict inherent in the issue. Carrying water was "work normally performed by women and children"; it was "common for women to share in agricultural work"; "the whole family worked in the fields harvesting"; "domestic work was entirely the woman's domain"; and "domestic work was not just cleaning, cooking and looking after children; because villagers until the end of the Mandate continued to grow at least a proportion of their own food, there was a good deal of processing to be done." To sum up, there seems to be little work left for men to do. Moreover, as she writes later, "Dowries were paid initially to the bride's father, in part as compensation for the loss of her labour to his household." Still later, four photographs in a double spread show means of transportation. In three of them, only men are seen, in an airport, a railway station, a bus; in the fourth, two women walk with baskets on their heads "returning home from market in Jerusalem." The author creates here a forceful visual discourse showing that women do almost all the heavy and hard work in village life. But she does not suggest we read these photographs as socially relevant evidence of the existing power structures within which women lived.

The nonconflictual presentation of the status of women is seemingly part of the political subtext of the book. It mirrors the low-key treatment of the Arab-Jewish conflict in most of the texts and images. There are a few photographs about Jewish life and activity in the country. But the author's readings of them are a textbook demonstration of political rhetoric. Graham-Brown describes construction work undertaken by the British (at the Haifa port) as having been "built" by them, whereas Jewish-built industries are qualified as "Jewish-owned." "Jewish workers" appear almost exclusively in conjunction with unemployment. About the photograph of the Kadourie agricultural school in Tulkarm, the author tells that the donor wanted a single school set up for Jews and Arabs, but "Jewish insistence . . . led to the founding of two separate schools . . ."; there is no mention that Kadourie was Jewish. In short, the role of Jews in the development of the country is underplayed.

And so is the Arab-Jewish direct conflict. Only two photographs at the very end of the essay, show Arab-Jewish relationships in terms of a direct conflict, including "physical coercion." Her caption reads: "Jewish colonists trying to put out a fire started by Arabs on the Plain of Esdraelon, September 1936. Attacks of this kind continued, but most Arab hostility was directed against the British and against other Arabs who were seen as collaborators with the British or the Zionists. During this period, however, there was a substantial build-up of Jewish defense units." The two last sentences have less to do with the photograph and with historical facts than with a carefully elaborated verbal strategy. The closing picture of the essay is a crudely posed war photograph. Here is Graham-Brown's text: "Palestinians fighting in Jerusalem (probably in 1948). An old woman, with the insignia of a sergeant in the Arab civil guard on her coat, fights alongside men." The photograph shows, most probably, two soldiers of the British-commanded "Arab Legion," two civilians holding handguns and another person standing in the background, before the position itself. Nobody is really shooting, it's a pose; the "old woman" wears a man's headcover (quite improbably, for Arab customs), and does not look like a woman at all. Photographically speaking, this is a "costume study" in the best Bonfils tradition.

The book is designed by "Namara Features"; the publisher, Quartet Books, is a member of the "Namara Group"—certainly an Arab organization—and the book is possibly a collective work. The author's own background is nowhere described (at least in the softcover copy in my possession) and her relationship to her collaborators is somewhat unusually qualified. She acknowledges, among others, "many friends whom I also have to thank for listening to my ideas," a description of relationships which figures, along with more conventional expressions of an author's gratitude, in the short introduction. The essay is



a political pamphlet; photographs, of course, are political. The author's interpretation is consistent with the manipulation of images and the essay's visual strategy. That is to say, the author's analysis of manipulated images is here intermingled with her own manipulations of the same material.

However, without and even with its "soft-sell" propagandistic elements, the essay is also a photographic history of Palestinian Arab society written from that society's perspective. The photographic self-discovery of Arab society is a complex task. Photography is not culturally valued. A religious text published in Cairo at the beginning of this century still treated photography as unlawful from the Islamic standpoint; only later texts, from the 1930s, tolerate it. Graham-Brown, in one of her readings, points to superstition—fear of the evil eye—as preventing people from posing for photographers. In addition, socio-economic conditions in pre-industrial societies were not favorable for a wider diffusion of photography. To the best of my knowledge, there were no Moslem photographers in nineteenth-century Palestine, and even later; and the majority of the population was Sunni-Moslem. One studio portrait in this book is credited to D. Subrinji. This photographer, signed elsewhere Dawid Sabounji, perhaps the first Arab photographer in Palestine, lived in Jaffa and took photographs of Jews and Jewish institutions as early as 1892. I do not know of his photographs produced for an Arab clientele, or anything about his life (nor does Graham-Brown give any details). Khalil Raad, the first Arab photographer in Jerusalem, was a Christian from Lebanon. Afif Tannus, whose pictures are included in the book, has a Christian family name. Graham-Brown criticizes him as having "imbibed many of the paternalistic ideas common among the British (and Americans) in a colonial setting." Family portraits in this book, except for one or two, are of Christian families. The photographers who took them are not identified.

In conclusion, most of the photographed middle-class families, and most if not all of the photographers, are not representative of the attitudes toward photography prevailing among the majority of the indigenous population. Hence, the photographic self-discovery of the Arab Palestinian society in its historical dimension has to be based on systematic and critical analyses of photographs taken by others. Sarah Graham-Brown's essay contributes to the demystification of outward-manipulated images, and thus to a process of cultural decolonization. I therefore recommend it, with my expressed reservations, to the interested reader.

**Adam Kendon, ed.** *Nonverbal Communication, Interaction and Gesture*. New York: Mouton, 1981.

**Reviewed by Bruce K. Eckman**  
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Mouton has decided to publish a series, *Approaches to Semiotics*, under the general editorship of Thomas Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok. Each volume will draw from past articles in *Semiotica* and will be organized around a unified semiotic theme for use in research or as a textbook. A leading expert in the particular field will edit each volume, writing an introductory chapter to set each *Semiotica* piece within the field and within the larger research context, and to update the literature subsequent to the original articles' publication.

This book is Mouton's first effort and it is a good one. Adam Kendon has done a very fine job of setting nonverbal communication within a larger context. In fact, his introduction is really the most stimulating part of the book. In addition, teachers and students who want an overview of one theme and are not familiar with the area will find seminal articles in the field placed next to each other for critical comparison and comprehension.

The first section addresses theoretical and methodological issues. This is to be applauded as an attempt to lay out theoretical issues for future work in nonverbal communication, the need for which is frequently heard at conventions and professional gatherings. Kendon has made an admirable attempt to tease out the theoretical issues in his introduction, but more could and should have been done. Some of the researchers whose work is reprinted here (e.g., Ekman and Friesen, "The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior: Categories, Origins, Usage and Coding") have published much more recent work in other journals, which could have helped the new student in theory development. Kendon has moved the field forward in his introduction, but reading the original authors' changes in thinking and refinements would have been more illuminating.

A second limitation of this section is the combining of theoretical and methodological issues at the expense of the latter. In reading the various articles about social encounters and gesture, one question repeatedly comes to mind: "How did the authors code their observations to come to that conclusion?" Since this problem is at the heart of many nonverbal controversies, a whole section on methodology and its recent developments would have been useful.